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15 August 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Soviet Stake in Cuba

1. The USSR's primary stake in Cuba is political. The Soviets regard Castro's revolution, and his subsequent alignment with the Communists, as one of the most telling blows to the prestige of the US which has occurred in the entire postwar period. In their eyes, it is a compelling demonstration of a major thesis which they are urging upon the underdeveloped countries everywhere: that the "colonial" peoples can throw off the "imperialist yoke" and, with the indispensable help of the USSR, successfully maintain their independence against their former masters.

2. In specific application to Latin America, the Soviets value the Cuban example as showing:

a. That a small but dedicated revolutionary group, with the sympathy and support of the oppressed masses, can prevail against the military power of a ruthless dictatorship supported by the Yankee imperialists.

b. That the Bloc will provide such a revolutionary regime with the economic aid required to offset anticipated US economic warfare and to develop the country.

c. That Soviet support, and especially Soviet missile power, will deter the US from military intervention to overthrow the revolutionaries.

d. That Latin American radicals can safely cooperate with local Communists, who will facilitate the securing of Soviet support without insisting upon seizing the leadership of the revolution for themselves.

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3. Cuba is also of value to the USSR as an operational base from which the revolution in Latin America can be furthered by propaganda, the indoctrination and training of militants, gun-running, and other clandestine operations. For the Soviets, however, this use is incidental and auxiliary to the political impact of the Cuban revolutionary example.

4. With the passage of time, the Soviet stake in Cuba has come to be defensive as well as offensive. The USSR's prestige has become involved with Castro's fortunes, and Moscow's political commitment to the survival and success of the Cuban revolution is deepening. In the past year the Soviets have reluctantly acquiesced in several moves -- Castro's proclamation that he is a Communist, his attack upon Moscow-oriented Communists seeking to undermine his leadership -- which have considerably reduced their freedom of maneuver. They have done this in large part because they are not prepared to accept the setback to their policies which would result from a breach with Castro.

5. Cuba could be used by the USSR as a military base from which to threaten the US. With the growth of Soviet strategic capabilities, however, installations on Cuba would add little to the weight of attack which the Soviets could direct against the US. The USSR's chief motive for the establishment of, for example, a medium-range missile base on Cuba would therefore be to deter an anticipated US military intervention against Castro.

6. The USSR almost certainly recognizes, however, that such an undertaking would be as likely to provoke as to deter American intervention. Further, the Soviets would either have to share control of such a base with the Cubans, in which case the risks of war would pass beyond their exclusive control, or affront Cuban sovereignty by denying Havana any role at all. Most important of all, by such an act the Soviets would firmly commit themselves to the military protection of Cuba, a step which they have thus far refrained from taking and which, we believe, they will continue to avoid. In this connection, it is notable that Soviet military aid to Cuba, while heavy, has thus far been confined to the development of essentially defensive capabilities.

7. In sum, we believe that the Soviets' stake in Castro, composed of both the great hopes they place in his revolution and the heavy loss of prestige which they would suffer upon its downfall, is high. They would probably be willing to accept further assertions of Cuban independence, and to increase the scale of their aid if this were necessary to insure the viability of the Castro regime. If its existence were threatened, the Soviets would deploy all the political weapons at their command in its defense. But we think it highly unlikely that they would undertake actions on Cuba's behalf which, in their view, involved any considerable risk of war with the US. Instead, we believe that they would try to make the regime's downfall as costly as possible, in political terms, to the US, and at the same time seek to repair their prestige rapidly with some visible triumph elsewhere in the world.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

ABBOT SMITH
Acting Chairman

*See
last p. x MRBMS*

10 August 1962

MEMORANDUM

A panel of the Board of National Estimates and Mr. Harvey have checked the Director's draft memorandum dated 10 August. Attached is a revised clean text embodying several editorial revisions for clarification, but no substantive change.

The Board of National Estimates points out that the last sentence of the Memorandum is contrary to NIE 85-2-62, conclusion C (page 1) and paragraphs 27-29 (pages 7-8). The Board believes that the prospect of the USSR locating medium range missiles in Cuba is slight.

*orig + 2 cc to DDI
via Montague*

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